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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Iran: Popular Discontent and a New Phase of Revolution

Ayatollah Khomeini has responded to signs of growing popular discontent by calling for renewed attacks on opponents of the revolution and an intensification of the effort to form a truly Islamic society. The clerical revolutionaries have used these exhortations to weaken Bani-Sadr as well as the leftists. The clerics efforts to push the "cultural revolution" over the next six months will further reduce government efficiency and cause more economic disorder and unrest, but the religious revolutionaries can use their revolutionary committees and street gangs to intimidate opponents. Khomeini's opponents are still disorganized. None of them has both the stature and the will to pose a successful challenge while Khomeini is alive and active.

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The continuing efforts of the clerics to emplace a truly Islamic society together with the government's inability to restore normal economic activity and maintain law and order have resulted in a perceptible increase in discontent in Iran over the past few months. Some middle class Iranians, who maintain telephone contact with exiles in West Europe, have been especially bitter in their complaints. Exile leaders are using their radio stations in Baghdad to stoke the discontent.

The Iranian middle class did not play a decisive role in the revolution, however, and is not a key factor in the current scene. The mood of the less affluent--the small shopkeepers, government and factory workers, and students, who form the bulk of Khomeini's constituency--is far more crucial, but also more difficult to judge. The lack of major strikes suggests that discontent is not acute.

This memorandum was prepared by the Southwest Asia Analytic Center, Near East South Asia Division, Office of Political Analysis. Comments or queries may be addressed to Deputy Chief, Southwest Asia Analytic Center on

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It appears, however, that the amount of grumbling has increased and that, at minimum, ardor for the revolution is continuing to wane. Revolutionary rallies in Tehran have drawn steadily less enthusiastic and smaller crowds, while attendance at leftist rallies has increased. The revolutionary clerics seem now to be turning more towards the Hezb-e-Allah street gangs rather than attempting to mobilize huge crowds to intimidate opponents. []

Khomeini's Concerns

Khomeini is clearly concerned that the revolution is losing momentum. After months of near political inactivity, the Ayatollah in mid-May reemerged to give numerous speeches decrying factionalism and castigating all enemies of the revolution. [] Khomeini during one meeting last month was visibly distressed that the leftist Mujahedin had attracted a large crowd to its major rally in Tehran and that, in general, the leftists were growing in strength. []

Khomeini again and again has demanded a vigorous Islamic cultural revolution. Khomeini has called for an end to public squabbling among his aides and strongly criticized the government for its poor performance. He portrays himself--as in the past--as a defender of the poor who are being badly served by the government and even the Revolutionary Council. []

The Ayatollah saved his more scathing condemnations for the left, especially the Mujahedin. It appears that he is seriously concerned that the Mujahedin may be eroding his support, particularly among the activist and impressionable young people. []

A Political Reordering: The Left

Khomeini's dramatic intervention significantly changed the political dynamics in Tehran as leaders and groups adjusted to the Ayatollah's criticisms. The leftists--because they were directly criticized--are most vulnerable. []

-- The Mujahedin--the largest leftist group--obviously fears it is to be made a scapegoat and has gone underground. It appears that the clerics of the Islamic Republic Party hope soon to arrest Mujahedin leaders and attempt to destroy the party. []

-- The independent Marxist Fedayeen which also has been directly criticized by the clerics, appears to have split. [redacted]

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[redacted] the majority faction now --with Moscow's blessing--emulates the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party in voicing support for the Khomeini regime.

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-- Although Foreign Minister Ghotbzadeh has recently lambasted the Tudeh Party as a tool of the Soviets, Khomeini and the clerics have not directly denounced the pro-Soviet Communists. We have reports that some Tudeh officials are becoming critical of collaborating with Khomeini, however. They argue that such a policy offers only temporary protection and hinders Tudeh efforts to recruit among the disaffected. [redacted]

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Impact on Bani-Sadr and Beheshti

Khomeini's sharp criticisms of strife within his movement momentarily cooled the contest between Bani-Sadr and Beheshti. We cannot divine Khomeini's motives for his attacks on factionalism. It is possible that acting on advice from anti-IRP elements in his entourage, the Imam wanted to halt Beheshti before he could reach preeminence and become a possible rival for attention. It is equally possible, however, that Khomeini simply saw such conflict as damaging the revolution, Iran and Islam. [redacted]

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Whatever Khomeini intended, he seems principally to have damaged Bani-Sadr, perhaps fatally. Bani-Sadr briefly sought to portray the Ayatollah's remarks as a license to push the government towards effectiveness under his control. Most Iranians, however, probably saw the criticism as aimed at Bani-Sadr because he heads the government. [redacted]

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Beheshti and his clerical followers on the other hand, took Khomeini's speeches on the necessity of a cultural revolution as a license to intensify efforts to construct an Islamic state dominated by their party. The IRP quickly demonstrated that it rather than Bani-Sadr and the moderates, interprets and implements the Imam's line. The clerics took the lead in purging hundreds of "anti-Islamic" people in the ministries, many of whom were Bani-Sadr's supporters. The IRP's apparent effort to eliminate the Mujahedin appears also designed in part to deprive Bani-Sadr of support. [redacted]

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Some of Bani-Sadr's closest associates are now saying that his days as a political force are numbered. Bani-Sadr may somehow--perhaps by persuading Khomeini to intervene--halt the IRP's rapidly increasing momentum, but this episode shows again Bani-Sadr's long term prospects of surviving as an effective political force are not good. He simply cannot match the IRP's political tactics and appeal. []

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The selection of a new prime minister will be a benchmark in the Beheshti/Bani-Sadr tussle. Beheshti and his associates almost certainly hope to install someone they can control. The IRP hopes the new prime minister--instead of the president--will control the government while allowing Beheshti to continue to operate behind the scenes. []

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If the IRP emerges victorious, Beheshti will have to play his cards very carefully. The IRP does not appear to be tightly organized. Once the opposition is eliminated, another ambitious clergyman might decide to challenge Beheshti's authority. Beheshti, moreover, possesses little personal popularity and some members of Khomeini's entourage seem to fear his ambition and want to undercut him. Some knowledgeable observers believe that Khomeini himself will not permit Beheshti to obtain much more power lest he come a rival. []

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Longer Term Impact

To satisfy Khomeini's longings for a purer Islamic Republic as well as to satisfy the mullahs who form the moving force in the IRP, Beheshti and his associates will probably continue to press the cultural revolution even after Bani-Sadr is vanquished. These efforts will further disillusion the secular middle class. These grumblers will be increasingly intimidated as purge committees in the ministries and in the security forces search out and eliminate opponents of the revolution. []

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Pursuit of the new theocratic order will further set back efforts to restore the economy causing growing hardships for the Khomeini's supporters in the lower middle class, especially the among urban workers. The clerics probably expect that loyalty to Khomeini and Islam will continue for some time to outweigh difficulties in the public mind. If necessary, Beheshti will also use his thugs to beat back public signs of opposition such as strikes and marches. []

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[redacted]

As signs of increased discontent appear, exiled Iranians will be encouraged to plot more vigorously a return to power. None of the exiles, however, possesses enough popularity to attract the people away from Khomeini. Some, like former Prime Minister Bakhtiar and General Oveisi, are tainted by their previous collaboration with the Shah's hated regime. The various liberal politicians in West Europe are virtually unknown except among the now impotent middle class. Other generals, who at one time opposed the Shah, have been in exile for so long that they also are little known and unlikely to spark the imagination of the public. [redacted]

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[redacted]

The exiles could elect to try some bold venture such as an invasion into an outlying part of the country. Such an effort would be a significant gamble and could quickly fail if Khomeini is in sufficiently good health to rally the rank and file in the military to move against the invaders who would be labeled as against Islam and tools of imperialists. [redacted]

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[redacted]

In sum, the regime's power base is continuing to narrow but Khomeini is not yet vulnerable. His opponents are still disorganized and leaderless and his charismatic appeal remains a potent intimidating factor. [redacted]

Essentially unpredictable events, such as the death of Khomeini either naturally or by assassination, however, could dramatically change the prospects for the revolution. Beheshti and his associates certainly are aware of their vulnerability once Khomeini is gone. This realization, in fact, is probably a major factor motivating them to seek a decisive victory over their opponents now. [redacted]

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